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AUTHOR	Stueck, Lawrence E.; Tanner, C. Kenneth
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ABSTRACT

The school environment must create a rich, beautiful, dynamic, meaningful experience for students to learn; however, architects, school boards, and the state focus almost exclusively only on the building when making design decisions. This document lists specific aspects to developing a visionary campus: one that provides a three-dimensional educational experience. Characteristics of the visionary campus include smaller size campuses, multi-age groupings, decentralized buildings, information access that goes beyond written or digital form, and sustainable architecture that is ecologically sound. (GR)

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The Design of Learning Experiences: A Connection to Physical Environments

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Lawrence E. Stueck, Ph. D.
Educational Consultant
P. O. Box 940
Watkinsville, GA 30677
stueckl@AOL.COM
(706) 769-4478

C. Kenneth Tanner, Professor
Educational Leadership
The University of Georgia
G-10 Aderhold
Athens, GA 30602
ktanner@coe.uga.edu
(706) 542-4067

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Environments

Introduction

Given that we only learn what we experience, our goal as curriculum designers must be to create rich, beautiful, dynamic, meaningful experiences for the students. With this idea in mind we must begin to view the physical environment as the basic context for experiences. The entire school site of 20+ Acres is considered the immediate educational context (Obviously, the state, community, home, etc. are included in the larger context).

We contend that the design of school facilities is just as important as the design of the curriculum. How many of you as curriculum or administrative personnel have considered yourself as the architect of the learning environment? Here is the fundamental way of thinking about learning experiences: Consider the educational needs of the students, the transportation needs, and the other basic needs of the students; then design a "place" for educational experiences. We must not depend on the digital and written realm alone to provide the richness, beauty, drama, and relevance the children seek (See for example, the plans and construction recommended by Emerson in Appendix A).

There are examples evolving across the planet of ways to provide a three dimensional educational experience. We are gathering these together to form a visionary campus which is also an action research site (Please see our display model). It is a significant extension of the alternatives addressed in the structures your school leaders are buying today, and varies greatly from ideas in school facilities planning classes.

The major design decisions are being made by architects with a bias toward buildings and not educational experiences for students. A second level of decisions for the purchase of school facilities is made by elected school board members who may or may not have knowledge about human development. A third level of decisions on the configuration of school campuses is made by central office personnel who are over worked and looking for the most expedient means of housing their ever expanding student population. This three-facet matrix is further confounded by a state level attitude toward facilities which speaks for itself.

There are many aspects to this visionary campus which differentiate it from the school environments presently funded in Georgia:

1) Size: The number of people involved on one site is a fundamental design consideration. In most of the Georgia counties experiencing growth, it is possible to build small campuses for 300-700 students for the same dollars per student as schools that house 500-1400 students. It is also possible to operate them for the same dollars. These smaller facilities create a psychologically and emotionally better environment for growth. They are

both ecologically sound and easier to integrate with the community.

2) Context: Information can be experienced in one, two, and/or three dimensions. Our goal is to allow students access to information in all three dimensions. This is a fundamental difference from most of existing systems, where most information is experienced in digital or written format. The *Walk-In Textbook* is a structure which allows the children to participate in the creation of experience in the many domains of our culture - History, Science, Community, Geography, Art, and Practical Life.

3) Site - Based Management: The physical arrangement of the buildings, the overall size, the integration of the material, and the multi age grouping all facilitate site-based management. Equally important is the shared decision making method of supervision. Our digital technology and high professional standards of the teaching staff allow a decentralized approach to school management. This alternative will also have significant implications on parent involvement and the self-direction of the children.

4) Multi-age grouping: Nowhere in our society is such limited age grouping found as in our schools. There is ample evidence that multi-age class groupings are better developmentally for children. The continuity of having the same teachers and classmates for three years has proved to be a more natural organization for living. The range of learning styles and abilities is given more room to be nurtured with this arrangement.

5) Inter-disciplinary curriculum: This aspect is about placing information in a context which relates to life outside of school. It is an ecological attitude toward experience where all the parts can be viewed as separate and also viewed as a united whole. These two ways of viewing reality which are both powerful and important sum up much of our work on the design of experience. They are as related as food and nutrition, content and context, or qualitative and quantitative. Our language of dichotomy makes it difficult to hold both views with equal importance and not to see them as different.

6) Decentralized buildings: This is a powerful structural variation from the existing approach to the educational facility. It has implications for solar heating, natural cooling, day-lighting, site impact, aesthetic richness, community involvement, and accessibility to the outdoors. The psychological ramifications of human scale buildings indicate to us how far removed from the child the design of school facilities has become.

7) Ecologically sound design: Sustainable architecture must be used on school campuses. The many tenets involved in this movement are those we wish to teach our children. Wise use of resources, leaving the environment better than we found it, and a goal of design which may be replicated, are desirable.

8) Meaningful, purposeful, relevant experience: This aspect as all others is

laced into an attitude toward the place for learning. The configuration of people, the clock, the spaces, the forms, and the land are all part of the curriculum. The case for a constructivist classroom is here extended to a case for a constructivist site.

Conclusion

"We are working to involve all aspects of the school and community in designing learning environments for our children. Our role is to find a formal base, such as the university community, from which to work. We need to be free from current bias about school facilities and the politics of design and construction so we can focus on making our schools ready for generations of the future."

Lawrence Stueck Ken Tanner

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Appendix A

The school design outlined in this appendix correlates with much of our thinking about

learning environments. Consider this 1842 statement:

So much do the future health, vigor, taste, and moral principles of the pupil depend upon the position, arrangement, and construction of the school-house, that everything about it is important. p. 128.

(From: Jean and Robert McClintock (1970). *Henry Barnard's School Architecture*. New York: Teachers College Press.)

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